An old Ektachrome from the 1960s

Reflections

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It started the other day when I went looking for a photo of my great-grandmother Ports. I went over to the wall of banker boxes — the endless archive of albums and loose photos I've been digging through for years — and I rummaged gingerly through a number of boxes, finally finding a small, interesting envelope randomly mixed in with items from my college years.
There are still things in those boxes I've never seen before. It's like wandering through an attic that never ends.

Tucked inside were four old slides from the early 1960s — completely out of place. I'd forgotten all about them. These slides somehow got pulled out decades ago, long before I ever started doing family research. When I moved out for college, they came with me. They sat in my office during the years I taught at UC Davis. I even had prints made.

It's strange how certain things follow you — how certain objects stay attached to your life like threads, waiting for you to tie the ends together.

This picture is one of those threads.

That's me in the center — and briefly I thought my brother was torturing me. But now I can see it's a magnificent floating-head trick. It's our first magic act. Mick was proud of himself — you can see it in his face.

Melissa in the center and Katherine Ann in the polka-dot dress on the right were my very lovely, very gentle aunts. Melissa married for the first time at 60, having met her husband while doing prison ministries — she loved to joke about that. She met him in prison. Katherine Ann spent eight years as a missionary midwife in the Cameroons. This photo must be right before she left. I remember those Christmas phone calls from Africa.

They're smiling the way proper women smile when a child is squirming and everyone is pretending nothing unusual is happening at all. If anything, they were probably relieved someone had finally gotten me to hold still.

And then there's the quiet, ever-present anchor of the photo:

my great-grandmother Anna Ports, standing on the left.

I always pause when I see her.

Just recently I received a packet of early family photos from my dad's cousin — the first time I've ever been able to trace the family's full route: Iowa → Oklahoma → back to Iowa → Toledo, Oregon → Astoria → and finally Camas. I had no idea the Booths and Ports zig-zagged like that. My great-grandfather Stanley was a schoolteacher in Toledo (and I think Astoria) and had to quit when he lost his hearing. He worked in the Camas paper mill for a time — new information to me. That's the part of the story everyone in this region seems to share.

Seeing Anna here — calmly watching whatever minor chaos Mick and I were creating — connects everything.

The migrations.

The mill.

The moves.

The stories I never heard.

The people I barely knew but somehow still carry with me.

This photo was taken behind my grandparents' house on Vermont Street in Portland — not far from Alpenrose Dairy. My dad grew up there. The girls grew up there. And it's extraordinary how a simple image can be a landmark in a family's memory, especially an old square Ektachrome like this one — the colors, the sun, everyone standing just so. It reminded me how much is still sitting in those boxes, waiting to be found, and how a single picture can suddenly pull a whole stretch of family history back into view.